NAVIGATING THE SAD EPOCH: SEXUAL EXPLOITATION WITHIN ENSLAVED COMMUNITIES IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History

Chapel Hill
2010

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ABSTRACT

Shannon Camille Eaves: Navigating the Sad Epoch: Sexual Exploitation within Enslaved Communities in the Antebellum South
(Under the direction of Heather A. Williams)

I formulated this project to explore the impact of sexual exploitation on enslaved women. By closely examining the choices that enslaved women made concerning romantic and sexual relationships, I hoped to understand how sexual exploitation affected the enslaved women who experienced or feared it and the enslaved community that witnessed it. To what extent was the existence of sexual exploitation embedded in the consciousness of men and women within enslaved communities? Did this exploitation consciousness influence the choices that enslaved women made about their lives? I argue that enslaved women found various means of coping with the damage of sexual exploitation. Their victimization bred feelings of fear and distrust for some, and resentment and the courage to fight back for others. It led to the development of an exploitation consciousness among enslaved people. The choices that enslaved women made regarding sex and relationships were informed by this consciousness of sexual exploitation.
To my parents, Robert and Lil Eaves, who have always loved and supported me unconditionally. I thank them for always encouraging my curiosity, providing me with wonderful educational opportunities, and fostering my talents and interests. I will be forever grateful because they worked tirelessly so that I could have a full and rich life. They will never know how much I appreciate them for allowing me to attend the college of my choice, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Though my time at Chapel Hill required them to make many sacrifices, they never complained. They marveled in my successes and celebrated my accomplishments. My educational achievements, including this thesis, are just as much theirs as they are mine. I stand on their shoulders and the shoulders of their parents, Lemuel and Edna Eaves, Sr., and Hawley and Pearl Newsome. As my father always says, “to whom much is given, much is required.” I thank and love you both for all that you have given me.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING THE SAD EPOCH

When Harriet Jacobs turned fifteen years old, she knew her life would drastically change. Born into slavery in Edenton, North Carolina in 1813, Jacobs declared entrance into womanhood a “sad epoch in the life of a slave girl.”¹ She found that as she sexually matured, she increasingly received more of her owner’s attention. Jacobs wrote, “He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of.”² Though being a child did not guarantee enslaved women protection from sexual abuse, Jacobs declared that womanhood only increased the possibilities of sexual exploitation. Historians have well documented the sexual exploitation of enslaved women such as Jacobs, and have argued that the racial and gender ideologies that reinforced chattel slavery made enslaved women vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment. Historian Deborah Gray White argued that being black in a white society, slave in a free society and woman in a society ruled by men made enslaved women the most vulnerable group in the Antebellum South.³ Now that we understand why enslaved women were so

² Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27
vulnerable to sexual abuse, it is important to explore how this vulnerability affected their lives. Jacobs’s description of womanhood as a sad epoch made me want to know more about how enslaved women experienced sexual exploitation; to explore how aware enslaved women were of the possibilities of sexual abuse and harassment; and more importantly, to come to know how they coped with these dangers in their everyday lives.

During the last twenty-five years historians have closely examined the lives of enslaved women in an effort to understand how gender ideologies of the colonial and antebellum periods affected their experiences in slavery. Prior to the 1950’s, historians like Ulrich B. Phillips argued that slavery was a benevolent institution that civilized Africans. When historian Stanley Elkins published *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1968), he created a major shift in the historiography that had both positive and negative consequences for the attention enslaved women received from the academy. In an effort to refute the benevolent institution argument, Elkins argued that the brutality of slavery robbed the enslaved man of power and led to his “utter dependency upon his master,” reducing him to a childlike figure known as “sambo.” Elkins’s scholarship rendered the enslaved powerless and psychologically changed—docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy. The next generation of historians

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4 In the early 1910’s, Ulrich B. Phillips established himself as the preeminent historian on southern slavery. Born and raised in Georgia during the era of Reconstruction, Phillips’s held the values of the slave-owning planter class of the “Old South” in high esteem. Because he believed that such high values could not produce an institution of corruption or immorality, he developed his study of slavery around the assumption that Africans were inherently inferior to whites, thus naturally suited for a lifetime of servitude. Phillips argued that slavery was a benevolent institution, one that allowed African slaves to “loosen their muscles, and lighten their spirits.” For more, see Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (Glouchester, Mass.: Appleton and Company, 1918).


6 Elkins, *Slavery*, 82.
became preoccupied with disproving this argument, which they believed emasculated the enslaved man and robbed him of agency. Historians John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, and Herbert Gutman incorporated, and validated in the process, slave-written sources in order to show that despite the brutality of slavery, the enslaved community created productive kinship networks through marriage, shared religious experiences, and child rearing. While these historians opened the door for examining and understanding enslaved women’s sexual victimization, their emphasis on restoring the humanity of enslaved men left little room in their analysis for discussing and understanding the long-term implications of the sexual abuse and harassment that enslaved women experienced.

With the publication of *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1986), Deborah Gray White became the first historian to publish a monograph specifically on the experiences of enslaved women in the South. Like other revisionist scholars of the 1970’s, White wanted to focus on the community within the slave quarters, specifically woman and “their will to quietly resist and avoid total domination.” White employed a gender analysis and argued that as the institution of slavery developed in the United States, members of white society used the African

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7 As a result of President Lyndon Baines Johnson’s domestic agenda (The Great Society) to eliminate poverty, the Justice Department commissioned Daniel Patrick Moynihan to explore why African American families were disproportionately falling into a cycle of poverty. In his report, *The Negro Family in America: The Case for National Action* (1965), Moynihan argued that many black families were experiencing a structural breakdown, most notably the absence of a male figure in the household. He concluded that this breakdown was rooted in psychological and social damage caused by the institution of slavery. Historians Blassingame, Genovese, and Gutman utilized slave-written sources in an effort to discredit Moynihan’s findings. Of the three, Herbert Gutman was the most interested in challenging Moynihan’s conclusion that the problems of the black family in the twentieth-century were passed down from slavery. Gutman argued that the two-parent household was the typical arrangement for the black slave family during and after slavery. For more, see John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, and Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

8 White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 8.
woman’s body and her nakedness to formulate the belief that she was innately licentious and hypersexual—a Jezebel. The Jezebel stereotype was used by white men and women alike to justify miscegenation between white men and African women. During the Antebellum period, it was permissible for white men to engage in sexual relations with enslaved women, though not always considered tasteful by certain members of society.  

This rich historiography paved the way for deeper exploration into the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. However, little has been done to show how enslaved women coped with sexual abuse and internalized their experiences. Though White provided the context for why enslaved women were so vulnerable to sexual abuse, it is historian Nell Painter who has urged future scholars not to neglect the psychological effects of physical and sexual abuse during slavery. In “Soul Murder and Slavery,” Painter argued that “while it is tempting to see all slaves as strong people who were able to transcend the violence to which they were subject from very early ages, ex-slave narratives also bear witness to much psychological hurt.” While it is important to note that enslaved men were also subjected to violence and therefore susceptible to psychological effects, Painter argued that there was a triple vulnerability to being an enslaved woman. Enslaved women were “among the poorest of working women and members of a race considered inferior, and, if they were domestic servants, like Harriet Jacobs, they spent long hours in the company of the men who had power over them.” In revisiting Ar’n’t I a Woman years after it was first published, White wrote that Painter’s

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9 For more on the Jezebel stereotype, see White, Ar’n’t I a Woman, 28-61.

10 Nell Irvin Painter, “Soul Murder and Slavery” (lecture, Baylor University, Waco, TX, April 5-6, 1993), 15.

charge to future historians nudged her to reconsider the agency she ascribed to enslaved women. Wanting to challenge Elkins’s “sambo theory,” White admitted that in emphasizing agency, she failed to take a closer look at the psychological impact of the enslaved woman’s condition.  

I formulated this historical project as a means to take up Nell Painter’s charge to explore the impact that sexual exploitation had on the lives of enslaved women in the Antebellum South. I needed to know the full story behind Harriet Jacobs’s “sad epoch.” Therefore, I have explored how enslaved women experienced, internalized, and responded to sexual abuse and harassment, as well as the hovering possibility of sexual exploitation. Jacobs also said that enslaved women were subject to drink from “the cup of sin, and shame, and misery.” Once her owner began whispering foul words into her ear, she knew she could no longer “remain ignorant of their import.” Jacobs is describing an awareness—or consciousness—of the vulnerability to sexual exploitation that slavery created. Perhaps incidences and threats of sexual abuse embedded themselves into the consciousness of those within enslaved communities in the Antebellum South. This led me to ask to what extent was the existence of sexual exploitation embedded in the consciousness of men and women within enslaved communities? Did this exploitation consciousness influence the choices that enslaved women made about their lives?  

By closely examining the choices that enslaved women made concerning romantic and sexual relationships, I hope to understand how sexual exploitation and the threat of it were internalized and psychologically processed by the enslaved women who experienced or feared it and the enslaved community that witnessed it. In other words,

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12 White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 9

sexual exploitation had psychological effects that had long-term implications for enslaved communities at large. I examine primarily the written narratives and interviews of men and women who were enslaved in the Antebellum South. Because I am interested in how consciousness developed and how knowledge about sexual exploitation was passed down from generation to generation, I utilize the Work Projects Administration interviews of formerly enslaved women and men conducted in the 1930’s.14 I hope this project will ultimately generate discussion and broaden our understanding of the ways in which sexual exploitation of enslaved women in the Antebellum South impacted the African-American family in slavery and in freedom.

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14When WPA interviews were transcribed, interviewers often spelled words phonetically in an attempt to capture the accent and dialect of formerly enslaved men and women. Though their intentions might have been pure, I find their method to be somewhat problematic. It matters very little how a person says a word. What is important is that the meaning of the word is communicated and understood. By utilizing phonetically spelling, WPA interviewers were likely trying to emphasize formerly enslaved people’s use of poor grammar and their mispronunciation of words, which undoubtedly could be attributed to years of being denied proper education. I have chosen to correct the grammar and spelling for the WPA interviews I use in this essay. The spelling and grammar choices made in the transcribing of these interviews were made by the WPA interviewers and not the formerly enslaved women and men themselves. Therefore, I feel comfortable that my decision in no way disrespects the sanctity of the words these men and women left behind for us study and learn from.
CHAPTER 2

THE BEGINNING OF THE SAD EPOCH: SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF ENSLAVED WOMEN

When Henry and Malinda Bibb were jailed for attempting to run away from their owner, Malinda was soon taken away by the jailer to the “private house” where “he kept female slaves for the base[st] purposes.” According to Henry Bibb, an enslaved man born in Shelby County, Kentucky in 1815, the slave jailer whipped his wife when she refused to submit to his “disgraceful assault on her virtue.” Because the Antebellum South was ruled by patriarchy, enslaved women like Malinda Bibb were subjected to institutions like the jailer’s “private house,” which were designed for men to act upon their perceived dominance over women. The fact that Malinda Bibb’s jailer created a private space for routine sexual assaults on enslaved women emphasizes the sense of entitlement that white men believed they had to the enslaved woman’s body. According to Bibb, when Malinda resisted, the jailer “punished her with the lash, threatening her that if she did not submit that he would sell her child.” When she maintained her position, she was tied up and flogged “until her garments were stained with blood.” Although Malinda Bibb was able to resist sexual contact with the jailer, the assault on her virtue, womanhood, and family had already been made. 15

A white man in the Antebellum South did not have to own a female slave in order to feel entitled to her body. When Minnie Fulkes reflected on her childhood as an enslaved girl in Chesterfield County, Virginia, she recalled her mother being tied up with a rope in a barn, with her arms over her head. The overseer on the plantation where Fulkes lived would take her mother there and beat her “till the blood run down her back to her heels.” Fulkes described the instrument he used to beat her as a horse whip. “It was a piece of leather about as wide as my hand from little finger to thumb,” said Fulkes. When she asked her mother what she had done to receive such a flogging, her mother said she had done nothing, “other than she refused to be wife to this man.” Like Malinda Bibb, Fulkes’s mother received a violent beating by the hands of a man who felt entitled to her body. Though not her owner, the overseer was still permitted to be an agent of power and dominance in the patriarchal South. Enslaved and a woman, Fulkes’s mother told her that “if he didn’t treat her this way a dozen times, it wasn’t nary one,” said Fulkes.²

Slavery created another condition that made enslaved women vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Because enslaved women were legally defined as property, their bodies were seen as a commodity that could be bought, sold, and manipulated as their owners saw fit. Harriet Jacobs lived under the constant gaze of her controlling slave owner, Dr. Flint, who spoke explicitly about his desire to have her sexually. According to Jacobs, he would whisper “foul words” in her ear that she could not possibly ignore. A respected physician and wealthy landowner in Edenton, North Carolina, Flint would constantly remind her that she was his property and “must be subject to his will in all things.”

master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him,” wrote Jacobs. Being defined as property dictated that slaves were to submit to the wishes of their owners. Consequently, sexual submission became an additional burden for enslaved women to contend with. As Flint was the father of eleven enslaved children, Jacobs understood the sexual nature of his request for her submission. Though Jacobs claimed that she was ultimately able to resist having sexual relations with Flint, she acknowledged that nothing, especially youth, could shelter her from the realities of womanhood on the Flint plantation.3

Though Harriet Jacobs’s efforts to resist sexual relations with her owner were seemingly successful, other enslaved women had a much more difficult time evading sexual abuse. An enslaved woman named Rachel, about twenty-four years of age, was purchased by her new owner to serve as a nurse on his Maryland plantation. According to a fellow slave, after a year, the owner’s son “became attached to her, for no honourable purposes.” Because obedience was expected of the enslaved, Rachel had little recourse in resisting his “attachment.” The exact nature of the son’s intentions is unknown, but this enslaved author wrote that the son degraded Rachel and that his actions “became a source of unhappiness to his mother and sisters.” Though miscegenation between white men and black women was permissible behavior, it was a source of discomfort and jealousy among many slaveholding women. Because the son’s mother and sisters were so unhappy with his “relationship” with Rachel, she was sold away from her mother to a new owner in Georgia. In addition to being a victim of unwanted sexual advances, Rachel was

3 Jacobs, Incidents, 27-28. For further discussion on miscegenation on the Flint plantation see Jacobs, Incidents, 35.
forcibly separated from her mother as a result. In an ironic twist, “that same son who had
degraded her, and who was the cause of her being sold, acted as salesman, and bill of
saleman.”

Similarly, an enslaved woman named Patsey was sexually harassed by her owner,
Edwin Epps, and as a result suffered at the hands of the owner’s wife. According to
Solomon Northup, an enslaved man who also lived on Epps’s Louisiana plantation,
Patsey’s back “bore the scares of a thousand stripes.” Northup insisted that Patsey’s scars
were not the result of a poor work ethic, or an “unmindful and rebellious spirit.” Instead,
Patsey had been punished for falling into the hands of a “licentious master and a jealous
mistress.” According to Northup, “she shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in
danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed
accursed.” Northup suggested that Patsey tried to resist her owner’s advances, but
claimed “if she uttered a word in opposition to her master’s will, the lash was resorted to
at once, to bring her to subjection.” He did not state that Patsey was forced to have sexual
relations with her owner, but his description of her being brought to subjection by the
lash suggests that violence was employed until she finally submitted to his sexual
requests. According to Northup, Patsey, like many other enslaved women, was “an
enslaved victim of lust and hate.”

Enslaved women like Patsey were susceptible to rape and sexual coercion because
slave owners had power over more than just their labor. Slave owners wielded power

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4 James Pennington, The Fugitive Blacksmith; or Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor
of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States in vol.2 of
546.

5 Solomon Northup, Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup in Puttin’ On Ole Massa, ed.
over the enslaved woman’s entire body. Having legal ownership over the enslaved woman’s body meant that slave owners could coerce enslaved women into having sex without the legal and social ramifications of rape. Eighteenth-century English common law defined rape as the “carnal knowledge of a woman forcibly and against her will.” According to historian Thomas Morris, as southern states adapted this common law, which served as the foundation of their judicial systems, to suit their needs, “race, age, and status were all elements” used by the courts to determine whether a sexual encounter was rape or not. No southern state had laws that prohibited or even acknowledged the possibility of the rape of an enslaved woman by a white man. While each state had statutes prohibiting enslaved men from committing rape, the laws specified that the victim had to be a white woman. By default, the laws of the South effectively determined that an enslaved woman was incapable of being raped, even by a fellow slave.

Slave owners did not conceive of their forceful sexual encounters with enslaved females as being problematic, much less rape. According to historian Sharon Block, because slave owners equated their economic mastery with sexual mastery, they were allowed to “manipulate forced sexual encounters into a mimicry of consensual ones.” Slave owners typically enacted sexual attacks during times of social and labor interaction. “Controlling a woman’s daily routine, her work requirements, and her physical presence—in other words, control over the labor and her body—gave men in positions of

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8 Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006), 68.
mastery access to a particular means of sexual coercion," argued Block.⁹ As property, enslaved women could be forced to “consent” by their owners, most often through violence or the threat of violence; in the minds of slave owners, this force was “refigured as consent.”⁹ Between 1700 and the Civil War period, there were no convictions against a white man for the rape of an enslaved woman.¹¹ The effect of this power dynamic is reflected in the writings of enslaved men and women. Elizabeth Keckley, born a slave in Dinwiddie Court House, Virginia in 1818, described her world as a “society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.”¹² Enslaved men and women like Keckley were aware that the law was not written to protect them. When authors like Solomon Northup wrote about instances of sexual abuse, they rarely used the legal discourse of rape, as the law did not apply to them. Instead, they used euphemisms for sexual behavior and abuse. While Northup could have harshly indicted Patsey’s owner for the sexual violence he inflicted on her via the pages of his narrative, he wrote instead that she was simply the victim of his “lustful eye” and his lash.¹³ As the law provided no protection for enslaved women like Patsey, enslaved people utilized alternative language to express their pain.

Harriet Jacobs also used euphemisms to describe her sexual abuse. Rather than disclosing the sexual requests that Dr. Flint made of her, Harriet Jacobs wrote that he filled her head with unclean images. While she could have written that Flint demanded to

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⁹ Block, Rape and Sexual Power, 71.

¹⁰ Block, Rape and Sexual Power, 68.

¹¹ Block, Rape and Sexual Power, 65.

¹² Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 16.

¹³ Northup, Twelve Years a Slave, 328.
have sex with her, she chose instead to write that he compelled her to submit to him. Elizabeth Sparks, a former slave from Virginia, described her owner as a man who had “done so much wrongness I couldn't tell you all of it.” Her next thought was to mention an enslaved girl named Betty who she said was a “favorite of his’n.” As a result of being his favorite, Betty was kept in good clothes and given privileges that others did not receive. Sparks did not say that her owner sexually abused Betty. However, she found fault in his relationship with Betty and provided his “attachment” to her as an example of his “wrongness.” While Sparks could have described Betty as a victim of sexual abuse, she chose instead to refer to her as one of his “favorites.” There was no reason for Sparks to articulate her owner’s actions as sexual abuse because the law did not define it as abuse and provided no protection from sexual abuse as a result. For Sparks, God would be the one to issue a final judgment. She concluded that she couldn’t tell because “God’s got all.”

Elizabeth Keckley also described her sexual abuse with euphemistic terms. Keckley, who regarded herself as an attractive black woman, explained that for four years a white man “had base design” upon her.” Suggesting that her beauty only increased her vulnerability to his sexual exploitation, Keckley wrote, “suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I—became a mother.” Keckley used the word persecute to indicate a forced sexual relationship with this unnamed white man; at some point during their four year association, she engaged in sexual intercourse with him, as she became pregnant. It is possible that Keckley was sexually harassed for an extended

period of time and was later coerced into a sexual relationship. Or, perhaps she was coerced into a sexual relationship from the start. The details of Keckley’s four-year involvement with this man are unknown. When writing her narrative, she might have been too ashamed to put on paper the things she did with this man. Perhaps she harbored embarrassment over not being able to put an end to the relationship sooner. Or, she might have been afraid to admit that her involvement in this four-year relationship provided her with a certain level of protection against harsh working conditions or the sexual advances of other men. Regardless of whether Keckley was forced to have sex with this man one time or a multitude of times, she felt that the word that best characterized her four-year experience was “persecute.”

In her narrative, Elizabeth Keckley also refrained from identifying the man she claimed persecuted her. However, after her only child, George Kirkland, was killed while fighting with the Union Army at the Battle of Wilson’s Creek in 1861, she identified his father as Alexander Kirkland on her petition for a survivor’s pension. Alexander Kirkland was a native of Hillsborough, North Carolina and was an acquaintance of Rev. Robert Burwell, the son of Keckley’s owner, Archibald Burwell. When Robert Burwell married Anna Robertson, his father sent fourteen year-old Keckley to live with the new couple as their house servant. When Keckley was eighteen, Robert Burwell moved his family and slaves from Virginia to Hillsborough, North Carolina, where he would eventually meet Kirkland. In the pension petition, Keckley wrote, “I being then, the slave of Hugh Garland, of Virginia; I was by him married to Alexander

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17 Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 75n5.
Kirkland (a white man) by whom I have one son, ‘George W.D. Kirkland’…”  

Keckley’s pension petition begs for a closer examination. She did not state that she was married to Alexander Kirkland. Instead she wrote that “by him”—presumably her owner Hugh Garland—she was married to Alexander Kirkland. As marriage between an enslaved woman and a white man would not have been legally or socially permitted at the time Keckley conceived her son or when she applied for his pension benefits, she most likely meant that she was given to Kirkland as a concubine. Though she was able to benefit from her association with Kirkland, claiming to be his wife in order to secure the pension, it is important to remember how she described her feelings towards their relationship. Keckley wrote, “I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain.”

When it came to choosing a sexual or romantic partner, enslaved women sometimes had little to no discretion. While slave owners were open to allowing enslaved men and women to choose their own sexual partners, if they were ultimately unsatisfied with a partnership or the lack thereof, they were known to “create” partnerships. When Henry Box Brown asked another enslaved man how enslaved marriages were handled on his plantation, the man said they had wives, but were “obliged to marry on their own plantation.”

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18 Though Keckley names her owner as Hugh Garland in her petition, she was actually the servant of Robert Burwell when she became acquainted with Alexander Kirkland. Garland, the husband of Robert Burwell’s sister Anne, would later gain ownership of Keckley and her young son, George, as a result of his marriage to Anne. For the full survivor’s petition, see John E. Washington, They Knew Lincoln (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1942), 209-210.

19 Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 16.

from home and as a consequence, “they were all related to each other, and master made
them marry, whether related or not.” At least one out of ten slave unions were forced
marriages. This lack of control over whom they could share their bodies with created
another form of sexual exploitation for enslaved women. When Englishwoman Fannie
Kemble married Georgia planter Pierce Butler, she was unfamiliar with the system of
slavery and the daily operations of an antebellum plantation. She spent a lot of time
talking with the enslaved men and women she had newly acquired in order to acclimate
to this new way of life. When Kemble met an enslaved woman named Molly, she asked
her who she was. According to Kemble, Molly responded by saying she “belonged” to an
enslaved man named Tony, “but proceeded to say that he was not her real husband.” Her
“real” husband, she said, had been sold away for attempting to escape. Though her owner
“provided her with the above-named Tony, by whom she had had nine children,” Molly
still had not accepted him as her own.

Although slave marriages were not recognized by the law, slave owners
encouraged enslaved men and women to couple as husband and wife. Slave owners
believed that married slaves were less likely to run away, and therefore, were less of a
discipline problem. Still, despite being encouraged, slave marriages were very fragile,

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21 Brown, Narrative of Henry Box Brown, 457.

22 For a further discussion on slave marriage, sexual reproduction within the enslaved community, and
forced partnerships, see Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 458-475, Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and
Freedom, and James O. Breeden, ed., Advice Among Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old
South (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980.)

23 Frances Anne Kemble, Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation, ed. John A. Scott (New York:
Knopf, 1961), 245-246.

24 For a further discussion on the benefits of slave marriage, see Blassingame, The Slave Community, 165-
170.
as Molly’s story indicates. Enslaved men and women were well aware of this fact. When Henry Box Brown met Nancy, an enslaved woman from Richmond, Virginia, he declared that he was seriously thinking of entering into the matrimonial state, “as much as a person can.” He was aware that as an enslaved man, his marriage to Nancy or any other woman would only be as strong as her owner allowed it to be. Brown explained that Nancy’s owner, Mr. Lee, who was a pious man and member of the Presbyterian Church, convinced him of the contrary and declared that he believed it was wrong to separate families, even enslaved ones. However, Brown wrote that after being married to Nancy for just one year, Mr. Lee’s “conscientious scruples vanished, and she was sold to a saddler living in Richmond.” Though Brown might have been convinced by Lee’s expressed respect for marriages among enslaved people, he was aware that the longevity of his relationship with Nancy was ultimately out of his control. William Wells Brown, a formerly enslaved man, reported that “there is no such thing as slaves being lawfully married.” He explained that an enslaved man could have as many “women” as he wanted and the same was true for enslaved women. “There has been never yet a case occurred where a slave has been tried for bigamy” because “the law takes no cognizance of such acts among slaves,” he wrote. Slave owners like Lee, not the law, determined whether enslaved spouses were kept together or torn apart. If an owner needed to sell someone’s husband or wife in order to pay a debt or generate income, the sanctity of an enslaved couple’s marriage, like Henry Box Brown and Nancy’s, was rarely a significant factor in

25 Brown, Narrative of Henry Box Brown, 471.

26 Brown, Narrative of Henry Box Brown, 471.
the slave owner’s decision. William Wells Brown tells us that “in fact some masters, when they have sold the husband from the wife, compel her to take another.”

Slave owners had multiple reasons to compel an enslaved woman to take a new “husband” or sexual partner once her previous husband had died or been sold away. While maintaining discipline was one reason, historian Jennifer Morgan argued that slave owners were more motivated to partner up enslaved women and men like Molly and Tony because they foresaw their own economic “future in the bellies” of enslaved women. Regardless of whether Molly accepted Tony as her real husband or not, she conceived nine children with him, which was most likely her owner’s objective when he partnered them. Because the institution of slavery rested on the slave population’s ability to reproduce itself, enslaved women of child bearing age like Molly were expected to engage in sexual relations and produce offspring. Reproduction became a central part of the enslaved woman’s responsibilities; therefore, ensuring that enslaved women had sexual partners became a priority for slave owners. According to Morgan, a slave owner could imagine that a handful of fertile African women could turn his “modest holdings into a substantial legacy.” She described the enslaved woman’s body as the vessel in which slave owners manifested their hopes for the future; it was a conduit of economic growth and wealth for slave owners’ posterity. As a result, Morgan has insisted that pregnancy and childbirth stand beside the “more ubiquitously evoked scenes of violence


29 Morgan, Laboring Women, 83

30 Morgan, Laboring Women, 83.
and brutality at the end of a slaveowner’s lash or branding iron.”31 The enslaved woman’s ability to become pregnant with a new generation of enslaved people made her most vulnerable to sexual abuse and rendered her virtually powerless over who she would share her body with. While Molly’s thoughts continued to be with her “real husband,” her body was given away to a new man and her owner gained nine enslaved children to add to his inventory.

Like Molly, an enslaved woman named Lavinia was compelled by her owner to marry a man she did not wish to marry. William Wells Brown, born enslaved in Lexington, Kentucky in 1816, wrote in his narrative that Lavinia was soon to be married. However, before the marriage could take place, the “man to whom she was about to be married was sold, and carried into the country near St. Charles, about twenty miles from St. Louis.” Despite the fact that Lavinia’s intended husband was sold unexpectedly, her owner, Mr. Calvert, “wanted her to get a husband,” and insisted that she marry another man. Like Molly’s owner, Calvert stood to gain something—an increase in his enslaved population if Lavinia got married and produced children. Though Calvert insisted that Lavinia marry another man, she “resolved not to marry any other man,” wrote Brown. Lavinia did not wish to consent to her owner’s new marriage arrangement and was punished as a result. Because she refused, Calvert “whipped her in such a manner that it was thought she would die.” William Wells Brown later found himself in a similar situation as Lavinia. Once his owner, Mrs. Price, cast her eye on an enslaved woman named Maria, she “was very soon determined to have us united, if she could so arrange matters,” Brown wrote. Though Price’s plans to marry Brown and Maria did not

31 Morgan, Laboring Women, 105.
materialize, she continued in her search for a potential bride for Brown. Price soon learned that Brown was partial to a woman named Eliza, and according to him, this “induced her at once to endeavor the purchase of Eliza, so great was her desire to get me a wife!” Even though Brown confirmed his affections for Eliza, he declared that marriage was the last of his thoughts. While Eliza’s feelings about the prospects of marriage are unknown, Brown’s narrative implied that the driving force behind the union was Price. Even if Eliza had objected, it likely would not have mattered. Brown told his owner directly that he did not wish to be married; nevertheless, “Eliza was purchased, and brought into the family.” Only Brown’s subsequent escape from slavery prevented his marriage to Eliza.32

While William Wells Brown was fighting to stay unmarried, an enslaved woman named Patsey found that she had to fight in order to maintain the relationship of her choice. Brown wrote in his narrative that Patsey was engaged to be married to an enslaved man named John Christy; however, Patsey was known to be the object of her owner’s affections. As a result, “Mr. Colburn had forbid her to see John Christy.” It is unknown whether Colburn’s affections for Patsey materialized into sexual relations; however, Brown indicated that Patsey paid a considerable price nevertheless. She was forbidden from being with the husband of her choice. When Colburn discovered that Patsey had been escorted home by Christy, the man he had forbidden her to see, he “took vengeance on the poor girl,” Brown wrote. “Mr. Colburn tied her up one evening, and whipped her until several of the boarders came out and begged him to desist,” Brown declared. While Colburn could have justified flogging Patsey because she failed to obey his order to stay away from Christy, it is more likely that his rumored affections for her

32 Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, 212-214.
were the cause of the punishment. According to Brown, Colburn wished to seek
vengeance on Patsey. His flogging was motivated by something other than his desire to
control her whereabouts. As he was so adamant about keeping Patsey away from Christy,
Colburn was likely more interested in controlling something more intangible—Patsey’s
ability to choose her own intimate partner. 33

Harriet Jacobs was denied the same opportunity. When she asked her owner if
she could be married to a “young colored carpenter; a free-born man” who lived near the
Flint plantation, he replied, “If you must have a husband, you may take up with one of
my slaves.” For Jacobs, this was not a reasonable alternative. She did not want her owner
to choose her husband; she wanted control over whom she joined with in marriage.
“What a situation I should be in, as the wife of one of his slaves, even if my heart had
been interested!,” Jacobs wrote. Jacobs knew her mistress would have approved of the
marriage to the carpenter, as it would have resulted in her departure from the Flint
plantation. “She would have been delighted to have got rid of me,” Jacobs wrote. “It
would have relieved her mind of a burden if she could have seen me sold to some distant
state.” Jacobs knew, however, that neither her mistress’s wishes nor her own would be a
factor in Flint’s decision. Jacobs declared, “I knew that Dr. Flint was too willful and
arbitrary a man to consent to that arrangement.” If Flint sold Jacobs, she would no longer
fall under his legal jurisdiction. But, if she married an enslaved man on his plantation,
she would remain within his reach. Jacobs understood that by marrying one of Flint’s
slaves, she and her husband would fall under his control. She wrote, “if I was married

near home I should be just as much in her husband's [Flint] power as I had previously
been,—for the husband of a slave has no power to protect her.”

Once scholars began to write about enslaved women, many qualified the
discussion of sexual exploitation by arguing that not all sexual relationships between
white men and enslaved women were exploitive. According to Eugene Genovese, most
white men “who began by taking a slave girl in an act of sexual exploitation ended by
loving her and the children she bore.” These enslaved women were referred to as
concubines or mistresses. Scholar Angela Davis challenged this notion by arguing that
any sexual relationship between a white man and an enslaved woman was sexually
exploitive by default. Davis argued that “by virtue of their economic position, [white
men] had unlimited access to black women’s bodies. It was as oppressors—or, in the case
of non-slave owners, as agents of domination—that white men approached Black
women’s bodies.”

Adding to Davis’s sentiments, Deborah Gray White contended that
most relationships between concubines and white men began as exploitative relationships
and most continued to be exploitive.

During a brief confinement in a Washington, D.C. slave pen, Solomon Northup
encountered an enslaved woman named Eliza whose experience as a concubine could be
used to justify Genovese’s claim that most slave owners loved their concubines. When

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36 For further discussion on non-exploitive sexual relationships and concubinage under slavery, see
38 White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 34.
Northup first encountered Eliza, she was “arrayed in silk, with rings upon her fingers, and golden ornaments suspended from her ears.” She had been born enslaved on Elisha Berry’s plantation. Berry, a wealthy man from Washington, D.C., left the home he shared with his wife and daughter and soon built himself another house on his estate. Eliza told Northup that soon after, Berry brought her to live with him in his new house, and “on condition of her living with him, she and her children were to be emancipated.” During the nine years she lived with Berry, she conceived a child by him named Emily. Though Eliza was enslaved, she had servants of her own who attended to her, and she was “provided with every comfort and luxury of life.” Eliza’s silk clothing, gold jewelry, and years of living in luxury indicate that her experience in slavery was vastly different from most other enslaved women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Elisha Berry’s concubine, Eliza obtained material things and lived a lifestyle that was exceptional, to say the least. However, Eliza’s nine years of luxurious living cannot be mistaken for love and affection. As Angela Davis suggested, Berry’s economic position as Eliza’s owner made his relationship with her exploitive by default. The lavish lifestyle he provided her was conditioned on her serving as his sexual slave. When Berry fell into financial trouble, his estate was divided among his family; as a result, Eliza was removed from the house she shared with Barry and became the property of Berry’s daughter. Though Berry had promised earlier to emancipate Eliza and the children she conceived by him, he chose instead to part with her to avoid financial misfortune. As a result, she ended up in a slave pen, awaiting sale, along with Solomon Northup. Eliza revealed that because she had lived as Berry’s concubine, she was already the “object of Mrs. Berry and her daughter’s hatred and dislike.” When Berry’s daughter took Eliza and her
daughter Emily to the city under the pretense of getting their “free papers,” she sold them to a slave trader named Burch instead. Though it is possible that Berry could have developed feelings of love for Eliza over the course of their nine years relationship, his love did not prevent her from ending up in the hands of a slave trader. She was still enslaved.39

William Wells Brown wrote about an enslaved woman named Cynthia who was also forced to become a concubine. Brown’s owner Mr. Walker was a slave trader. While on one of his slave-trading voyages, Walker purchased Cynthia and instructed Brown to put her in one of the ship’s staterooms away from the other slaves. While Brown did not include in his narrative his owner’s direct reason for this request, he did hint at his own suspicions. “I had seen too much of the workings of slavery, not to know what this meant,” he recalled after receiving his orders.40 While most enslaved women were sold and purchased for their labor, some were traded specifically for sexual services and were known as “fancy girls.” While fancy girls were bought and sold specifically for sexual purposes, other enslaved women were not exempt from sexual propositions.41 These circumstances were common enough that Brown had plenty of reasons to assume he knew the meaning of his owner’s request to separate Cynthia from the other slaves.42

The intention behind Walker’s request became clearer once Cynthia came face to face with her new owner. Brown overheard Walker make “offers” to Cynthia, which she subsequently rejected. “He told her that if she would accept his vile proposals, he would

39 Northup, Twelve Years a Slave, 245-247.
40 Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, 194.
41 For more on the Fancy Trade see White, Ar’n’t I a Woman, 37. Also see Frederic Bancroft, Slave Trading in the Old South (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1931), 217-218.
42 Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, 194.
take her back with him to St. Louis, and establish her as his housekeeper at his farm. But if she persisted in rejecting them, he would sell her as a field hand on the worst plantation on the river,” Brown wrote. First, Cynthia had to decide if she wanted to serve her new owner as a housekeeper, or as a field hand at a notoriously harsh plantation elsewhere. The general perception among members of enslaved communities was that house laborers received better treatment than field laborers and were a part of an elite class within the population. Therefore, Cynthia likely considered the advantages that working in the house might afford. Next, she had to decide if accepting his “vile proposal” was worth securing the presumably less strenuous housekeeping position. Though Brown did not directly state what Walker propositioned Cynthia for, he provided clues that suggested this proposal was sexual in nature. After describing Cynthia’s initial meeting with Walker, he wrote the following about her subsequent fate: “Without entering into any farther particulars, suffice it to say that Walker performed his part of the contract, at that time. He took her back to St. Louis, established her as his mistress and housekeeper at his farm.” While Cynthia obtained the position as housekeeper for Walker, she also became his mistress in the process. While Walker’s half of the contract entailed making Cynthia his housekeeper, her half entailed becoming his mistress, or risk being sold as a field hand along the river. The fact that Cynthia’s choices were between entering into an unsolicited sexual relationship and facing harsh work conditions as a field hand illustrates her lack of control in choosing her sexual relationships. Though it may appear that

43 For additional information on the perceptions of field work and house work within the slave community see Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 249-251.
Cynthia had a choice, she had no meaningful choice at all. As a free woman with full control over her body, Cynthia would have likely chosen neither option. 44

Henry Bibb found that his wife Malinda had been placed in a very similar circumstance. After being separated from his wife and child for several years, Bibb returned to the slave state of Kentucky to inquire about his wife and child. Bibb wrote, “I learned, on inquiry, and from a good authority, that my wife was living in a state of adultery with her master, and had been for the last three years.” He learned from his mother-in-law that their former owner, Whitfield, “had sold her to this man for the above purposes at a high price.” Miranda was purchased to serve as a concubine. Bibb learned that as a result, “she was better used than ordinary slaves.” The scenarios offered by Northup, Brown and Bibb reveal the precarious circumstances under which concubines lived. Serving as a concubine could provide protection from harsh working conditions and lavish living conditions as Cynthia and Eliza’s stories reveal. However, it also required sexual submission. By virtue of being a slave, those women who did not want to serve as concubines could still be made to comply with their owner’s wishes. Regardless of whether concubines or mistresses were “better used than ordinary slaves” or received special treatment for their services—better living conditions or manumission for themselves or their children—their inability to reject these unsolicited sexual relationships without the threat of punitive consequences makes these relationships exploitive in nature. 45

Each of these reports sheds light on the various ways in which an enslaved woman could be sexually exploited. Some women were able to resist; others were

44 Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, 195.
45 Bibb, Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb. 188-189. For further discussion on the benefits of concubinage, see Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 415.
subdued through violence or separation from loved ones. While these cases are arguably
exceptional because they were preserved in narratives and through interviews, they are
still only a sampling of what was likely taking place on antebellum slave plantations
across the South. One question that remains is what happened once these acts or threats
of abuse took place. Harriet Jacobs tells us that for enslaved women, womanhood was the
start of a sad epoch. To what extent was a consciousness of sexual exploitation embedded
in the minds of those within enslaved communities in the Antebellum South?
CHAP3ER 3
LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF THE SAD EPOCH: EXPLOITATION
CONSCIOUSNESS

Acts of sexual exploitation were not discrete events; they reverberated among enslaved people, eliciting emotions and evoking sadness and powerlessness. Indeed, these acts led to the development of an exploitation consciousness. When Harriet Jacobs reflected on her experiences living on the Flint plantation, she continued to flesh out her beliefs about the enslaved woman’s sad epoch. If an enslaved woman was made beautiful, this was indeed the greatest curse God could bestow. “That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave,” wrote Jacobs. Jacobs’s theories about enslaved women’s susceptibility to sexual abuse were undoubtedly confirmed by the constant pressure she received from her owner, Dr. Flint. He often took advantage of their moments alone, telling her that she was made for his use, “made to obey his commend in every thing.” Though Flint did not physically restrict Jacobs with his hands, his words were enough to diminish her sense of power and control. “I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong,” Jacobs wrote. The threat of sexual exploitation and the powerlessness it created were firmly planted in her consciousness. It is evident too, that Flint’s debasement of Jacobs affected others besides her. Jacobs wrote that her enslaved counterparts on the Flint plantation noticed that the light heart which
nature had given her had become “heavy with sad forebodings.” Yet, they did not need to inquire about the reason for the change. According to Jacobs, “they knew too well the guilty practices under that roof” and pitied her. Jacobs’s experience serves as a lens for seeing how the effects of sexual abuse extended beyond the enslaved woman to enslaved communities at large. Jacobs and the other enslaved men and women who lived on the Flint plantation had to do nothing more than observe their owner’s eleven enslaved children to attest that the prospects of being sexually exploited were real and imminent. According to Jacobs, circumstances like this became embedded into their consciousness and elicited feelings of pity and helplessness for those enslaved women who endured Flint’s sexual advances.  

For Fanny Berry, a formerly enslaved woman from Virginia, contending with sexual advances from white men was a part of the enslaved woman’s life. When she was sexually assaulted by a white man, she decided to fight back, knocking over chairs and eventually scratching the man’s face until he left her alone. Berry considered herself “one slave that the poor white man had his match” in. She recalled that many enslaved women were not so fortunate. Some were beaten up when they resisted and there was always the possibility of death if one rebelled. Aware of the sexual abuse suffered by other enslaved women, she concluded, “us colored women had to go through a plenty, I tell you.” One formerly enslaved man wrote that the condition of enslaved women “often oppressed me with a load of sympathy.” While he was careful to acknowledge


that enslaved men faced their own challenges, he felt that the struggles of the enslaved
woman, who was “compelled to perform unfit labor, sick and suffering,” were augmented
because she was also forced to “bear the burden of her sex unpitied and unaided.” After
slavery ended, Annie Burton wrote in her narrative that the greatest thing about
emancipation was that the black woman was “no longer the easy victim of the unlicensed
passion of certain white men.” Though slavery presented many challenges for men and
women, Burton, who was previously enslaved in Clayton, Alabama, considered the
enslaved woman’s most significant challenge to be sexual exploitation. Conscious of this
burden, she praised the enslaved woman’s emancipation from slavery because she
believed the enslaved woman to be the “mightiest moral factor in the life of her
people.” The sexual exploitation that enslaved women were susceptible to under
slavery only diminished that force.

A formerly enslaved man from Maryland also provided insight into the perceived
burdens of enslaved women, stating that if young, attractive women were not raised and
sold to serve as concubines for “a class of economical Louisiana and Mississippi
gentlemen,” they were likely subjected to shameful degradation at the hands of their
young owners at home. According to Henry Box Brown, “one of the strongest motives
which operate upon the slaveholders” was having unlimited control over the enslaved
woman and her body. The selling and buying of fancy girls—sexual slaves—allowed

49 Henson, The Life of Josiah Henson, 509-510
51 Burton, Memories of Childhood, 67.
52 Pennington, The Fugitive Blacksmith, 546.
53 Brown, Narrative of Henry Box Brown, 458.
the purchasers of these women to do just what Brown suggested—have complete control over their fancy girls’ bodies. The enslaved population was very much aware of the fancy girl trade and the characteristics that made an enslaved woman vulnerable to it. William Craft, who had once been enslaved in Macon, Georgia, declared that the “more pious, beautiful, and virtuous the girls are, the greater the price they bring, and that too for the most infamous purposes.” 54 When William Wells Brown first met Cynthia, who eventually became his owner’s mistress and housekeeper, he concluded that she was likely a quadroon and declared her to be the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Like Craft, Brown was aware that simply being beautiful could materialize into a life of sexual servitude for an enslaved woman. When his owner propositioned Cynthia to be his concubine, Brown attempted to calm her fears. Though he tried to comfort her and offer her encouragement, he “foresaw but too well what the result must be.”55

The profitability and exclusivity of the fancy girl trade likely heightened the enslaved population’s consciousness of this form of sexual exploitation. Though a small part of the interstate slave trade, the fancy girl trade yielded large sums of money for the slave traders who sold these women and it created status and mystique for the men who could afford to purchase them. 56 Purchasing a fancy girl was not just about sex, it was also about demonstrating power. Through their purchase, a slave owner could show that they had the power to do even those things that were socially forbidden, like engaging opening in sexual relations with an enslaved woman. Isaac Franklin was a slave trader

55 Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, 195.
56 For more on the fancy girl trade, see Walter Johnson, Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 113-115.
out of New Orleans, Louisiana who managed his own interstate slave-trading firm in partnership with John Armfield of Alexander, Virginia in the 1820’s and 1830’s. On November 1, 1833, he wrote a letter to his associate Rice Ballard, a slave trader from Richmond, Virginia who worked for the firm, stating that “there are great demand[s] for fancy maid[s].”

“I sold your fancy girl Allice for $800,” Franklin wrote. Knowing how valuable fancy girls were, Franklin wrote to Ballard to express his disappointment in not meeting a fancy girl that Ballard had told him about. “I was disappointed in not finding your “Charlatt[es]vill[e] maid that you promised me,” wrote Franklin. A few months later, Franklin wrote Ballard concerning the same woman. He threatened to charge Ballard a considerable sum of money for not keeping his promise to make this woman available for sale. “The fancy girl from Charlatt[e]sville will you send her out or shall I charge you $1100 for her,” Franklin wrote. “I fear the term for the $1100 prices are over and that I will not get to see the fancy maid.”

Franklin’s letters to Ballard illustrate the seriousness of the fancy girl industry. While money was the most significant thing at stake for men like Franklin and Ballard, enslaved women stood to lose their virtue and sense of security as a result of the fancy girl trade.

It is easy to understand how the enslaved woman’s vulnerability to the sexual servitude became a part of Solomon Northup’s consciousness. During the time that Northup spent with Eliza, who had once served as a concubine for Elisha Berry, he saw her transform from a dignified woman, adorned in silk and gold, to a “blubbering,

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57 Here, fancy maid is used interchangeably with fancy girl. Franklin uses a variety of terms to describe fancy girls, including fancy maids and fancies.

58 Isaac Franklin to RC Ballard, November 1, 1833, Rice C. Ballard Papers, Folder 12. No. 4850, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Here after SHC.

bawling wench.” According to Northup, this was how Theophilus Freeman, the slave trader who had purchased both Northup and Eliza, characterized her after her first child Randall was sold. Eliza found herself in more emotional distress when she realized Freeman also intended to separate her from her one remaining child, a daughter named Emily. As slaves for sale in Freeman’s slave pen, Northup and Eliza were sold to a “cheerful and attractive” gentleman, along with another enslaved man named Harry, for $2600. Northup and Eliza’s new owner also inquired about purchasing Eliza’s daughter Emily. When he asked Freeman what Emily’s price was, Freeman said, “What is her price? Buy her?,” in what Northup described as an “interrogatory” tone. “I won’t sell her. She’s not for sale,” Freeman said, according to Northup. When the gentleman insisted that he was willing to pay a reasonable price, Freeman explained that when Emily became older, she would be worth “heaps and piles of money,” wrote Northup. According to Northup, Freeman expounded that “there were men enough in New-Orleans who would give five thousand dollars for such an extra, handsome, fancy piece as Emily would be.” Northup became very familiar with the workings of the fancy trade. Freeman explained that because Emily was beautiful—a doll—and not like “thick-lipped, bullet-headed, cotton-picking niggers,” she was invaluable. Northup had witnessed this tragic side of slavery touch two generations of enslaved women. He knew too well how vulnerable enslaved women were to a lifetime of sexual servitude.60

William Craft knew that the fancy girl trade was not the enslaved woman’s only concern. He expressed concern over the frequency in which slave owning “gentlemen” fathered children by the enslaved women they owned. Craft, whose wife Ellen was fathered by her slave owner, was very familiar with the practice of miscegenation

60 Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 265, 268.
between white slave owners and enslaved women. In fact, it was Ellen’s light complexion that aided the couple in their escape to Pennsylvania in 1848. Posed as a white man, Ellen traveled to Philadelphia by train with William Craft by her side, posing as her male servant. While William Craft was intimately connected to this form of sexual exploitation, he understood the practice of slave owners having sexual relations and impregnating enslaved women as something that could take place on any plantation. This was a part of the enslaved community’s reality. It had potential to affect any enslaved woman at any time. “Any man with money (let him be every such a rough brute), can buy a beautiful and virtuous girl, and force her to live with him in a criminal connexion,” wrote Craft. Craft explained that because the law protected the interests of the slave owner over that of the enslaved woman, “she cannot escape, unless it be by flight or death.” Though Craft’s fear could have been fostered by his wife’s lineage, his concern for enslaved women at large suggests that their vulnerability to sexual exploitation was firmly rooted in his consciousness.61

According to Austin Steward, it was nearly impossible for a person to be unaware that white men were having sexual relations with black women. He declared, “Who does not know, that in three-fourths of the colored race, there runs the blood of the white master—the breeder of his own chattels!”62 Steward’s choice to compare slave owners to breeders sheds light on the inhumanity that accompanied the practice of miscegenation on antebellum plantations. Every time a slave owner forced himself sexually onto a female slave, he bypassed gaining her consent and increased the possibility of gaining offspring

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who would be his property. As his property, she could be restrained and made to obey. For those slave owners interested in “breeding” their own chattel, they could poke, prod, and impregnate a female slave for the purpose of sustaining their enslaved population.

Enslaved and formerly enslaved men were particularly concerned about the possibilities of sexual exploitation for the enslaved women with whom they were intimately connected. Their expressions of fear for their mothers, daughters, and lovers suggest that the threat of sexual exploitation was not merely a part of their consciousness, but was often at the forefront of their minds.63 James Pennington declared that his enslaved brethren were widely awakened to their inability to protect their own wives and daughters from predatory slave owners. Formerly enslaved in Maryland, Pennington wrote that enslaved men “are also conscious of the deep and corrupting disgrace of having our wives and children owned by other men—men who have shown to the world that their own virtue is not infallible, and who have given us no flattering encouragement to entrust that of our wives and daughters to them.”64 He acknowledged that in addition to him, the world knew how vulnerable his wife and daughters were in the hands of “licentious” slave owners. Austin Steward expressed that the frustration was in the fact that “the slave husband must submit without a murmur,” while he sees his wife “exposed to the rude gaze of a beastly tyrant.”65

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63 Because the majority of slave narratives were written by men, we have a larger record of their thoughts and feelings about sexual exploitation. Though some historians have urged that we use slave narratives with caution because they were tools for anti-slavery advocates, they still can be used as a rich resource for understanding how enslaved people experienced slavery and discovering which social ills they found to be most egregious.

64 Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, 550.

65 Steward, *Narrative of Austin Steward*, 702.
William Craft expressed similar frustration. For Craft, the enslaved man’s greatest tragedy was not being able to protect his female family members from sexual abuse. “If there is any one thing under the wide canopy of heaven, horrible enough to stir a man’s soul, and to make his very blood boil, it is the thought of his dear wife, his unprotected sister, or his young and virtuous daughters, struggling to save themselves from falling to pray to such demons.” Like Craft, Henry Bibb worried about the possibility of his wife falling into the hands of the wrong “gentleman.” “If my wife must be exposed to the insults and licentious passions of wicked slave drivers and overseers; if she must bear the stripes of the lash laid on by an unmerciful tyrant; if this is to be done with impunity, which is frequently done by slaveholders and their abettors, heaven forbid that I should be compelled to witness the sight,” Bibb declared.

For enslaved communities, knowing that enslaved women could be exposed to “licentious” owners incited many emotional responses. For men like William Craft and Henry Bibb, it incited feelings of powerlessness and anger, and sometimes created a desire to retreat in order to not witness these infractions. For enslaved women, this awareness of sexual exploitation, whether it was from personal experience or word of mouth, generated feelings of anger, powerlessness, and fear. It also informed them of their limited control over their bodies. This exploitation consciousness influenced how enslaved women navigated through life. The emotional and psychological consequences of sexual exploitation were real and were often a significant factor in enslaved women’s decision making.

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66 Craft, Narrative of William and Ellen Craft, 899.

67 Henry Bibb, Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, 42.
CHAPTER 4

NAVIGATING THE SAD EPOCH: SEXUAL AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN THE WAKE OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

By not defending enslaved women against physical and sexual abuse, or even acknowledging them as social ills, antebellum white society condoned coerced sexual relationships, such as Alexander Kirkland and Elizabeth Keckley’s. For Keckley, however, having this relationship with Kirkland caused her deep “suffering” and “mortification. When describing the sexual aspect of their liaison, she used the word “persecute” to characterize it. This was a relationship that inflicted pain and produced feelings of shame and regret. Keckley even lamented the birth of her child, the most tangible consequence of her sexual relationship with Kirkland. “If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life,” Keckley declared. The pain Keckley suffered as a result of her relationship with Kirkland affected her outlook on future relationships. From that point on, Keckley believed that relationships should be approached with caution. When James Keckley, proposed marriage, she wrote, “for a long time I refused to consider his proposal; for I could not bear the thought of bringing children into slavery—of adding one single recruit to the millions bound to hopeless servitude, fettered and shackled with chains stronger and heavier than manacles of iron.” Keckley’s hesitation to enter into a new relationship sheds light on the feelings that her
previous sexual abuse created within her. Though her proposed marriage would have been a consensual relationship, she knew that the end result could be the birth of another child. Because of her own painful experiences, she did not wish to bring another human being into enslavement—the very system that declared her womanhood unworthy of protection. Though Keckley eventually married James Keckley, George Kirkland remained her only child.68

Every day, enslaved women had to make choices regarding their families, communities, health, and survival, all while facing the challenges of being a woman and a slave. Specifically, sexual exploitation, and the consciousness it created within their communities, informed decisions about sex and intimate relationships made by enslaved women across the Antebellum South. Though enslaved women and men continued to form sexual and familial relationships throughout the antebellum period, the psychological consequences of sexual exploitation and their effects on relationships cannot be denied. For those who were directly or indirectly affected by the trauma of sexual exploitation, sex became more than simply an expression of love and physical desire between consenting individuals. Because enslaved women had little control over the sexual uses of their bodies, they gained a broadened understanding of what sex meant and how it could be used in their lives. This development ultimately influenced how enslaved women understood, defined, and approached their personal relationships, both sexual and romantic.

Harriet Jacobs realized that her status as a slave would forever prevent her from following the aspirations of her heart. “Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away

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by the hand of violence?” Jacobs asked these questions when reflecting on the love she lost at the hand of her owner Dr. Flint. When he rejected her request to marry the free-born carpenter, Jacobs asked, “Don’t you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?” Flint declared that she must have thought more of herself than she was to ask such a question. Jacobs was reminded that as a slave her wishes did not matter. “Youth will be youth. I loved, and I indulged the hope that the dark clouds around me would turn out a bright lining. I forgot that in the land of my birth the shadows are too dense for light to penetrate,” Jacobs wrote. Though Jacobs temporarily indulged the idea of controlling her sexual destiny, she became conscious of the restrictions that enslavement placed on her. The dark clouds she wrote about represented her inability to control her own sexuality. 69

Once her plan to marry the man of her choice was rejected by Dr. Flint, she had no choice but to accept the limited options enslavement afforded her. She wrote, “when I reflected that I was a slave, and that the laws gave no sanction to the marriage of such, my heart sank within me.” She realized that by being a slave, she would never be afforded the right to let her heart choose a romantic or sexual partner; at that point, her views on sex and relationships changed. She argued that slavery made it impossible for her to hold on to her virtue. “I wanted to keep myself pure; and under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect.” When marriage was placed out of reach, Jacobs wrote, “I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair.” In the beginning, Jacobs saw sex as something to be reserved for marriage. In light of her inability to choose her own spouse, she declared that her prospects of remaining a virtuous woman were slim. “If

69 Jacobs, Incidents, 37, 39.
slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery.” She confessed that she subsequently became the mistress of an educated white man in the neighborhood near the Flint plantation. Because slavery rendered her vulnerable to sexual abuse and denied her the right to choose her own lover, she no longer felt it necessary or possible to reserve sex for marriage. When explaining the efforts she took to remain pure she wrote, “I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me.” She became a mistress and the mother of two children, but never a wife.  

For Harriet Jacobs, only the abolition of slavery would give enslaved women the power to determine whom they had sex with and allow them to choose whom they wanted to love. Until then, it behooved all enslaved women to become conscious of their vulnerability to sexual exploitation. As previously stated, Jacobs declared that beauty was one factor that increased an enslaved woman’s possibility of being sexually abused. While Jacobs declared beauty a curse from God, Maria, an enslaved woman who traveled with Solomon Northup to New Orleans in a slaver’s boat, embraced her beauty and saw it as a means to choose her destiny. According to Northup, Maria was “a rather genteel looking colored girl, with a faultless form” who “entertained an extravagantly high opinion of her own attraction.” Knowing that beauty was a characteristic that some white gentleman enjoyed in an enslaved woman and were willing to pay significant money for, Maria was determined to use her beauty to attract the highest bidder. According to

70 Jacobs, *Incidents*, 37, 54. For more information on Jacob’s becoming the mistress of Mr. Sands, see the section entitled “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life” in Jacobs, *Incidents.*
Northup, Maria had no doubt that “some wealthy single gentleman of good taste would purchase her at once!” Northup declared that Maria, in addition to being vain, was quite ignorant. Rather than fearing what a wealthy gentleman might have in store for a beautiful enslaved woman, Northup suggested that Maria embraced the opportunity. Maria might have believed that her beauty and sex appeal were the only assets she had as an enslaved woman—her only means for securing a better way of life.71

According to Solomon Northup, before Eliza ended up in Theophilus Freeman’s slave pen, she “enjoyed opportunities such as are afforded to a very few of her oppressed class.” As the concubine of Elisha Berry, she spent nine years living in the house he built especially for the two of them. For those nine years, she escaped work in the cotton fields, and “had been lifted up into the region of a higher life.” Though her lavish accommodations were contingent on maintaining her sexual relationship with Berry, Eliza had something greater to gain from their arrangement—freedom. When he promised to emancipate her and her children on the condition that she live with him as his concubine, she did not resist his proposal. Though Berry could have forced Eliza into his bed at any time, Northup’s account suggests that Eliza had faith in her owner. According to Northup, Eliza believed her owner to be “a man of naturally a kind heart” and she “had no doubt, [he] would grant it [freedom] to her.” Seeing that freedom was not typically promised in exchange for sexual servitude, or any form of slave labor, Eliza might have accepted her lot as Berry’s concubine. Once she learned she could become free and secure freedom for her children, she likely developed a new meaning for sex. It served as a means to acquire a lifestyle that was completely out of reach for the average enslaved person. Once Eliza moved out of Berry’s house and was no longer his concubine, her

71 Northup, Twelve Years a Slave, 255.
circumstances quickly changed. According to Northup, when Eliza was sold away from
the Berry plantation, she was separated from both of her children and introduced to life in
the cotton fields and slave cabins. She had “the glorious vision of liberty faded from her
sight as they led her away into captivity, Northup wrote.”

William Wells Brown reported that when Cynthia’s new owner proposed that she
become his mistress and housekeeper, she “bewailed her sad fate with floods of tears.” Her tears were indicative of the difficult decision that lay before her. She could become
Walker’s concubine, or be sold off to an unknown place. Cynthia was no longer
permitted to view sex as a physical and emotional exchange between two people. It now
represented a means to escape trade to a notoriously harsh slave plantation. In the end,
Walker established her as his mistress and housekeeper and “he had two children by her.”
Though Cynthia appeared to have a tough decision to make, the decision was virtually
made for her. For Cynthia, the consequences of having sexual relations with Walker and
bearing his children were outweighed by the fear of the unknown. This relationship,
though not consensual, provided her a means of protection and security.

It is not difficult to understand why an enslaved woman would place a high value
on protection and security. The conditions of enslavement presented enslaved women
with many challenges beyond the possibility of sexual exploitation—like the pressures of
keeping their families together and avoiding the physical pain of flogging. For some
enslaved women, protection from the many ills of slavery became a top priority. Rose,
who was born into slavery in Bell County Texas, conceded to a sexual relationship with

72 Northup, Twelve Years a Slave, 247, 269.
73 Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, 195.
74 Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, 195.
an enslaved man named Rufus in order to evade the whipping stake. When she was about sixteen, her owner, “Master Hawkins,” informed her that she would now be sharing a cabin with Rufus. Being young, Rose didn’t understand the implications of Hawkins’s request. “I thought that he meant for me to tend the cabin for Rufus and some other niggers,” Rose said. When Rufus attempted to climb in her bunk, she “puts the feet against him and gives him a shove, and out he go on the floor before he know what I’m doing.” The next day, Rose went to Hawkins’s wife to report what Rufus had done. According to Rose, she said, “You am a portly girl, and Rufus am the portly man. The master wants you-uns for to bring forth portly children.” Despite this explanation, Rose still greeted Rufus with a fire poker when he tried to enter into their cabin that night, rejecting the idea of engaging in a sexual relationship with him. According to Rose, Hawkins quickly called for her the next day and said, “Woman, I pay big money for you, and I done that for the cause I wants you to raise me childrens.” He explained that he had put her and Rufus together for that purpose and that unless she wanted a “whipping at the stake,” she better do what he asked. At that time, Rose reflected on her life before coming under Hawkins’s ownership. She described her former owner, “Master Black,” as a cruel man who would “whip the colored folks and works them hard and feed them poorly.” When the Civil War started, Black put his plantation and slaves up for auction. Hawkins purchased Rose, along with her mother and father, and kept their family intact. According to Rose, when Hawkins bought her, he saved her from being separated from her family. When she considered this, along with his recent threat to whip her, she concluded that being with Rufus was more tolerable than being flogged or ripped away from her family. “There it is. What am I to do? I decide to do as the master wishes, and
so I yield,” Rose said. Like Cynthia, Rose did not wish to enter into a sexual relationship. She resented Hawkins for partnering her with Rufus and said, “I always hold it against him.” Knowing, however, that her choices were limited to having sexual relations with Rufus or suffering physical violence at the stake, Rose decided to conceive of sex as a means to secure her physical wellbeing. This experience shaped Rose’s beliefs about marriage and relationships for the rest of her life. Even once the Civil War ended and she became emancipated and could legally marry the man of her choice, she decided that she would never marry. “One experience am enough for this nigger. After what I did for the master, I never wants no truck with any man. The Lord forgive this colored woman, but he have to excuse me and look for some others for to replenish the earth,” said Rose.  

After reconciling the loss of virtue and purity that marriage would have afforded her, Harriet Jacobs sought a relationship that provided protection, and a sense of freedom and control. As a young woman, Jacobs’s mind and heart were set on love. However, after conceding to her inability to preserve her virtue, Jacobs soon lost faith in her ability to find love. She realized that as a slave, her desires mattered very little. Her will was secondary to Dr. Flint’s will. “He had an iron will, and was determined to keep me, and to conquer me,” Jacobs wrote. Jacobs learned that Flint had plans on building her a small house in a secluded location. “He talked of his intentions to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me,” she wrote. In the beginning, Jacobs was very concerned with preserving her virginity for love and marriage. Once Jacobs realized her owner would never consent to selling her or give up his desire to have her sexually, she began to look

for something other than love. Flint’s harassment caused her to place love aside and begin searching for an intimate relationship that could place her one step closer to having control over her body and her life. “There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment,” Jacobs wrote about her new lover—a young, white politician she referred to as Mr. Sands. According to Jacobs, Sands was an educated and eloquent gentleman. She found him to be trustworthy and she valued the security their association provided. Though she felt her sexual relationship with Sands compromised her purity, Jacobs concluded that slavery forced enslaved women to make compromising decisions. She wrote, “There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible.” Jacobs felt that she was forced to choose protection and kindness over virtue and love.  

Like Jacobs, Henry Bibb questioned the enslaved woman’s ability to find and sustain love. When Bibb learned that his wife had become the concubine of her new owner he concluded, “Poor unfortunate woman, I bring no charge of guilt against her, for I know not all the circumstances connected with the case. It is consistent with slavery, however, to suppose that she became reconciled to it…” Bibb had earlier believed that Malinda could never become comfortable with such an arrangement. He wrote about her numerous battles to resist sexual abuse and keep her family together. She resisted the sexual advances of her prison guard, even when he threatened to sell her child. According to Bibb, when Malinda thought of being separated from her husband, she said,

76 Jacobs, Incidents, 42, 53, 55.

77 Bibb, Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, 189.
“Oh my soul! My heart is almost broken at the thought of this danger separation. This may be the last time we shall ever see each other’s faces in this life, which will destroy all my future prospects of life and happiness forever.” Bibb thought that he was Malinda’s source of happiness and security, but this would soon change. After being separated from his wife for a time and learning that she had subsequently become the concubine of her new owner, Bibb came to believe that Malinda must have found safety and even perhaps happiness in her new position. For him, she must have been content with her circumstances “from the fact of her sending word back to her friends and relatives that she was much better treated than she had ever been before, and that she had also given me up.” It is impossible to know whether these were Malinda’s actual feelings. Unlike Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley, Malinda Bibb did not write her own story. We receive it instead through her husband. As a result, we are left to decipher what she may have felt. These could very well be the conclusions of a hurt and disappointed husband. However, assuming that Malinda did send the message that she was better off in her new situation, her sentiments could have reflected a decision to no longer look to Bibb for protection and security. Once Bibb made his escape to free territory, Malinda no longer had her husband to fight for her protection. Perhaps Malinda did not become reconciled to her position at all, as Bibb suggested. Maybe she made a decision to no longer rely on love as a means of protection.

On the other hand, Patsey, who was flogged for secretly meeting with her fiancé, disregarded safety and protection to pursue their relationship. According to William Wells Brown, Patsey and her fiancé John knew the risks of disobeying her owner’s

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orders. He had already threatened to flog John if he stepped onto his plantation. While Patsey knew that pursing a relationship with John without her owner’s approval could have significant consequences, she made a conscious choice to be with him anyway. She understood her intimate relationship with John to be something worth suffering consequences for. In the end, it was not John who became the victim of Colburn’s temper. Instead, it was Patsey who suffered the physical consequences when Colburn “took vengeance on the poor girl,” wrote Brown.80 Like Patsey, Molly was also determined to maintain her relationship with her husband. When Molly’s husband was sold away from Fannie Kemble’s plantation, he did not stop being her husband—at least in her mind. She maintained an attachment to him even though he was gone physically. Once her owner partnered her with a new man named Tony, Molly became a part of two relationships—she considered one to be a marriage and the other to simply be an arrangement made by her owner. Despite being forced into a new sexual relationship, as evidenced by the nine children she conceived with Tony, Molly chose not to divorce herself from the intimate relationship she shared with her husband.

While reconciliation appeared to work for Molly, Patsey, who lived on the Epps plantation with Solomon Northup, found little comfort. Her sexual abuse led her to develop feelings of hopelessness not only about relationships, but about life as a whole. Solomon Northup detailed in his narrative that Patsey remained the target of her owner’s lustful eye. As a result, she not only had to combat his sexual advances, but the wrath of his jealous wife as well. According to Northup, if Patsey “was not watchful when about her cabin, or when walking in the yard, a billet of wood, or a broke bottle perhaps, hurled from her mistress’ hand, would smite her unexpectedly in the face.” Her suffering led her

80 Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, 185
to question the meaning and value of life. Northup wrote, “Nothing delighted the mistress so much as to see her suffer, and more than once, when Epps had refused to sell her, has she tempted me with bribes to put her secretly to death, and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp.”\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{81} Northup, \textit{Twelve Years a Slave}, 328.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION: THE LINGERING EPOCH

For those enslaved women who came face to face with the trauma of sexual exploitation, life could not stop. Obedience was still mandated, work still needed to be performed, children—even those who were the product of coerced sex—still needed to be raised, and the factory that was known as the plantation still needed to be run. Instead of crumbling in the wake of sexual abuse, these enslaved women had to find means of coping with the damage that had been done. Though life went on, the psychological effects of sexual exploitation were ever-present. This kind of victimization bred feelings of fear and distrust for some, and resentment and the courage to fight back for others. As these instances were experienced and witnessed by enslaved women and men on plantations all across the Antebellum South, they left impressions that would factor into life decisions for generations to come.

In the writings and recorded memories of those who were enslaved, there was often discussion about licentious masters and jealous wives. Marriage continuously appeared as a contested topic. For some enslaved men, marriage and slavery were incompatible institutions. Marriage required that you serve as the head of your household and safe guard your wife from the outside world, yet slavery robbed you of the power required to do those very things. As enslaved women navigated their way through life, their choices regarding sex and relationships were often informed by this consciousness.
of exploitation. Some felt it best to avoid relationships and some held tight to memories of relationships destroyed long ago. Some were faced with impossible decisions, like having to choose between one’s security and virtue. The unfathomable nature of these circumstances often led people to make choices that went against convention. It is hard to comprehend a kind of pain that would cause a mother to abandon her child, or make a woman beg a man to end her life. However, for many enslaved women, this kind of pain was not far removed.

A young, enslaved woman who was an acquaintance of Harriet Jacobs lay on her death bed after giving birth to her owner’s child. According to Jacobs, the woman’s mother cried, “The baby is dead, thank God; and I hope my poor child will soon be in heaven, too.” Her owner’s wife quickly replied in anger, “There is no such place for the like of her and her bastard.” Though this young woman had been impregnated by her owner, and was the source of his wife’s contempt as a result, she still found the strength to provide comfort to herself and her mother. Armed with the knowledge that she was not the only enslaved woman to suffer this kind of sexual exploitation, she looked to her mother and declared, “God knows all about it; and he will have mercy upon me.”

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